
Preface

Dear BreAnna,

I just wanted to let your know that I've had you on my mind. The call came in last night. You were en route to the hospital—maybe you would live. The phone kept ringing. Every thirty minutes or so the updates came—abdominal bruises—fractured wrist—cracked ribs—punctured lung—no brain activity. . . . Maybe you will live. . . . I waited and prayed . . . why I'm not sure. If you lived, what would you be—and the other choice was dying—but why? We started our investigation; three counties worked together and three counties waited. Everyone wished we had a prior report. Anything to work with, anything but this.

I interviewed a child that morning and had a meeting at noon. The rest of the day we shared news about you. During some quiet moments, when defenses were down, the question came—What did you go through? What went through your mind? You are two. Nowhere to go or to even know that you should go. Too little to reach a door-knob—too tiny to run. A picture of your eyes comes to mind. Terror. And I wonder. . . . Did you call for your mama. Last year someone turned your name in at Christmas. You were an angel on our Christmas tree. Someone drew your name and gave you a good Christmas. Just a little while ago.

Today a man inflicted more injuries on your little body in a few moments than most bodies experience in an entire lifetime. I am sorry BreAnna. I wish we had known about you. Then two calls came in close together. Three p.m.—a man killed himself—he was going to be arrested for felonious child abuse as soon as they found him. Three forty-five p.m.—the last information about you. You died a few minutes ago. No charges. No court. No trial. No hope. Three counties of social workers stop. Newspapers and television question the workers—“What is it like to work a case like this?” For today, they get no response.

The struggle begins to fight the questions, but the questions creep into our minds. What does it feel like to be beaten to death, BreAnna? Did you hold your tiny arms up for help? Did you try to get away? Did you cry? Several people ask what a two-year-old toddler could do to make a man so mad. The answer—nothing. She could do nothing.

Five o'clock came and we went home, knowing more about life than we wished we had to . . . and my daughter asks, “What's wrong, Mom?” with eyes alive and bright and fearless. . . . I tell her, “Nothing.” My husband asks about my day. “Interviewed a child this morning, had a meeting at twelve, phone calls and paperwork all day.” Oh, and a child died today.

You were an angel on the Christmas tree last year. Goodbye BreAnna. I am sorry this happened to you.

The story of BreAnna was written by Lori Woodruff, LMSW, who served the Mississippi Department of Human Services for many years as a front-line social worker,

supervisor, regional director, and training director for the state. The BreAnna story was used by Lori Woodruff and Kim Shackelford in training sessions with Mississippi Department of Human Services child welfare workers. The story evokes emotional responses similar to what child welfare workers in the field experience after working with abused and neglected children. This story was used during the initial training of child protection workers in Mississippi to demonstrate the emotions that workers would experience with some of their child protection cases. After reading the story, the new child protection workers were encouraged to talk about their emotions, and they were then taught the possible effects of working with traumatized clients and the symptoms of secondary traumatic stress. The story has been used for years. Lori Woodruff and Kim Shackelford are sisters, but it was only after Lori was asked if the story could be used in this book that she shared the truth behind the story. She asked Kim if she had ever told her about the writing of the letter, and for the first time, almost twenty years after the death of BreAnna, Lori shared the following:

I did go home after BreAnna died that day. I was the supervisor for three counties. We were all numb at work and couldn't talk about it. The man who murdered BreAnna had killed himself and we were supposed to move on and act like nothing had happened. I couldn't go to sleep that night, and when I did, I had a nightmare of two horses fighting to their death and there was nothing I could do to stop them. The gore and the blood and the death woke me and I was shaking and crying. I knew I had to get control of myself, and I got out of bed and wrote a letter to BreAnna. Writing, to me, was always a way to express thoughts that couldn't be said out loud. I wrote it and remember being exhausted and thinking, "There, it is done." I laid the letter on the kitchen counter, planning to take it to work with me, and went back to bed. My husband got up before me and found the letter. He said, "When you write stuff like that, don't leave it lying around." I knew he couldn't deal with and did not want to hear about what I deal with everyday, but I remember that it also made me feel so very alone. I remember thinking, "How am I supposed to help my workers, when I don't know how to deal with it myself." One of the most agonizing things about this event was the community members calling to make themselves feel better. The callers needed someone to talk to because they had heard BreAnna cry or had suspicions about the abuser and they were trying to find someone who would understand or relieve them of the guilt they were feeling. The workers and I talked about this and discussed how we wanted to scream at them that if they had done what they should have, BreAnna would be alive. Of course, being the empathetic social workers that we were, we listened and also felt their agony. I still get choked up and tearful when I read the story of BreAnna.

It took Lori almost twenty years to discuss the trauma she went through on that day. Many workers have never discussed the cases that brought the most trauma into their lives and do not realize that the reactions they have are symptoms of secondary traumatic stress. This book is the result of years of research and study regarding the prevalence of secondary traumatic stress among child welfare workers. It is our hope that it will help the countless child welfare workers affected by sec-

ondary traumatic stress to work through what has happened and is happening to them. We also hope that it will give others the information they need to recognize the symptoms as they occur.

Advice to the Reader

This book contains both qualitative and quantitative information. The information is sometimes graphic and painful. The content may evoke difficult memories in the reader. We suggest that staying cognitive while reading this text will make the content more understandable and usable. Please take this into account and plan your reading accordingly. When possible, it may be beneficial to discuss the content in groups. While much of the content is centered on traumatic situations and the negative results of working with trauma victims, we also discuss successful outcomes for children and families and rewards of working in the field of child welfare.
